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# The mediating role of self-concept discrepancy in the relationship between values and personal based motivation of luxury products consumers

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## Abstract

This study integrates existing streams of literature in luxury and self-concept theory in order to provide evidence of the mediating role of self-concept discrepancy in the relationship between values and personal based motivation of luxury product consumers. This study is the first to focus on this topic providing evidence of the role of personal values in driving luxury motives and incorporating the self-concept construct in the luxury literature.

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**Keywords:** Luxury; values; motivation; self-concept discrepancy

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## 1. Introduction

According to McKinsey & Co (1990) the luxury goods market was estimated to be more than 86\$ billion whereas in 2005 the Boston Consulting Group estimated it to be 840\$ billion worldwide (Fiske & Silverstein 2004). This market has seen spectacular growth over the last 20 years, and only recently in 2008 the total sales volume has suffered a decline by 2 percent in comparison with 2007 (Bain & Company 2009) due to the world economic slowdown. This decline in such a profitable market triggers luxury product companies to try even harder to differentiate from their market competitors.

The marketing of luxury products has received little attention from both academics and practitioners (Nueno and Quelch 1998). This can be explained by the difficulty in defining the luxury concept (Cornell 2002, p.47) and therefore to distinct luxury from non-luxury consumers. One main factor, which, distinguishes luxury from non-luxury products is the psychological benefit (Nia & Zaichkowsky) which may outweigh the functional one

(Vigneron & Johnson 2004). Cornell (2002) states that ‘luxury is particularly slippery to define’ and that key components are ‘a strong element of human involvement, very limited supply and recognition of value by others’. Due to the lack of a single luxury definition, our study grounds on the aforementioned luxury definitions.

Veblen’s (1899) *Theory Of The Leisure Class* coined the term ‘Conspicuous consumption’ to define the behavior of consuming in order to signal wealth, power and status and Leibenstein (1950) based his research on this typology presenting the snob and the bandwagon effect. Since then, research is focused on these social-oriented motives and the motive of ‘impressing others’ serves as a basic strategic principle for the marketing management of luxury brands (Vigneron & Johnson 1999, 2004) although socially oriented motives are not sufficient to explain the luxury consumer behavior totally (e.g., Hansen 1998; Vigneron & Johnson, 1999, 2004). According to Wiedmann, Hennigs and Siebels (2009, p.626) ‘a personal oriented type of consumption should also be considered in the marketing management of luxury brands’.

The understanding of how the perception of value affects the consumers’ buying behavior is critical for luxury researchers and marketers (Wiedmann, Hennigs and Siebels 2009). Although values can lead to different selection or evaluation of desirable behaviors or end states (Schultz & Zelezny 1999) and the symbolic meaning of luxury brands conveys personal values and personality traits (Vigneron and Johnson 2004), very little attention has been given to incorporate value-based positioning practices in the luxury consumer literature. Values influence on consumer behavior can be mediated or moderated by factors such as worldviews, personal norms, the self-concept, attitudes and situational or contextual influences (Rohan 2000). Vigneron and Johnson (1999) suggest that prestige products strongly relate to the person self-concept.

This study is based upon Higgins (1987, p.321) Self-Discrepancy Theory, which suggests that despite the peoples’ individual differences in motivation ‘we are motivated to reach a condition where our self-concept matches our personally relevant self-guides’. Taking into account the different decisions that managers have to take when managing a service compared to a product and that drivers regarding luxury consumers’ behavior remains unexplored, the authors fill a research gap by providing empirical evidence for Vigneron and Johnson’s (1999) framework for luxury consumers’ independent of interpersonal influence motivations inspired from the research of Dubois and Laurent (1994). Moreover, they are also the first to provide support for the mediating role of Ideal-Actual self-concept discrepancy in the relationship between values and personal motives shedding some more light on the under-explicated role of self-concept in the consumer behavior literature (Mittal, 2006) as well as in the luxury marketing. Our framework assumes that these values and motives are independent as Vigneron and Johnson (1999) proposed when presented in his framework five independent motives as a consequence of five independent motives, as well as Sheth et al (1991) did in their study of consumption values allowing us to examine the effect of a specific value on a specific motive.

## 2. Theoretical background and literature review

Values make a huge motivational impact on individuals (Vriens and Ter Hofstede 2000). Products tied to values will be experienced more favorable than products that deliver more mundane benefits (Kahle 1985) and in overcrowded markets with competing brands which are difficult to differentiate, consumers will choose based on value-expressive considerations (Reynolds and Gutman 1984). Additionally, values explain the individual’s purchase reasons and motivations for their use of a certain product (Sheth, Newman, & Gross 1991) and guide the evaluation or selection of desirable behavior or end states (Schultz and Zelezny, 1999). This research is based on Sheth, Newman and Gross (1991) theory of consumption values, which is applicable to services and proposes that consumer choice is a function of multiple consumption values which make different contributions but are axiomatically independent. Thus, our research presents two discrete conceptual frameworks:

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